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ABSTRACT

Teacher-student classroom relationships and behaviors at the University of Alaska's Fairbanks campus are compared with instruction by audioconference and computer conference, with attention to instruction of Native Alaskan students. Classroom behaviors of Natives and non-Natives are contrasted, particularly with regard to participation and signs of paying attention. Instructors' and students' difficulties with audioconferencing are noted: elimination of all but audio cues, need to shut out environmental stimuli, problems in obtaining feedback, and lack of the human, personal touch. Problems with computer conferencing, such as lack of institutional mechanisms for delivering courses in that medium and the large volume of discussion and comments input by instructors and students, are also described. Advantages of the use of instructional telecommunications are briefly discussed, including the fact that the large number of participants can encourage a loose structure in which students can respond to and learn from each other more than would be possible in a lecture hall, and instructors can monitor what occurs without attempting to control it. The paper notes that this mode of teaching requires a radical reconstruction of the teacher-student relationship, in which the teacher is viewed not just as the source of knowledge, but as a facilitator in the exchange of ideas and information. (MH)

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The Teacher-Student Role in Instructional Telecommunications

By

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Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association (December, 1981).

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The Teacher-Student Role in Instructional Telecommunications

The University of Alaska as a land-grant university is mandated to serve a rural, Native Alaskan population with radically different realities in terms of values, cognitive orientation, and communicatve patterns from the personnel who represent the institutional viewpoint of the University. As a result of the largely conflicting realities of the University and the Native population, a smaller percentage of Natives than non-Natives enter the University. Of those that enter as freshmen, only a small minority graduate.

For the last two years, Ron Scollon and I have been engaged in an ethnographic study of the interface between the University of Alaska and its rural and Native constituents. This study has involved a variety of teaching, research, and service activities supported by various agencies and branches of the University. This paper grows out of attempts by the University to extend its services to rural residents by means of instructional telecommunications. We are currently teaching a course using audioconferencing and computer conferencing to reach students in six different locations across the state. While our concern has been to address the interaction of Native students with the University as a social issue, we have found phenomenological and microethnographic approaches to social interaction to be useful in understanding the different ways of constructing social reality.

In this paper, I will discuss the ways in which the teacher-student relationship is constructed in classroom interaction at the Fairbanks campus of the University. I will compare this with instruction by audioconference and by computer conference.

In our on-campus research we observed and did videotape analysis of five classes with both Native and non-Native students. The professors were males in their forties, one Native and four White. We looked at such patterns as spatial arrangement, rhythm, attention and feedback, turn exchange, and the order in which material was presented to get at ways in which the institutional roles of teacher and students are played out in ongoing interaction. While there were individual differences in teaching style, there were many ways in which what took place was characteristic of institutional behavior on the part of instructors and students.

For example, the spatial arrangement of the classroom sets the scene for patterns of movement and gaze direction among the participants. Rows of chairs are placed between the door and the blackboard that covers the wall. There is more space between the blackboard and the first row of chairs than anywhere else in the room, sometimes as much as half of the area of the room. Somewhere in this space is a lectern toward which the chairs are oriented. Students enter the room and take their places in seats, take out notebooks and shift the volume and topics of ongoing conversations. When the professor enters the room, conversation is further subdued as he takes his place behind the podium. The teacher takes out notes and papers which he shuffles while everyone prepares to begin the class session. He may distribute papers or write on the board, displaying his right to move freely through the classroom while the students must remain motionless in their chairs. The movements students do make are in response to those of the teacher: holding out a hand to receive a handout or turn in an assignment, or writing down what the teacher has said or written on the board.

The role of the student in this situation is to pay attention to what the teacher says. She shows active involvement in the class by facing the teacher and visually following his movements and writing down what he says. She speaks only when given the floor by the teacher and gets up only when he indicates that the class is over.

This ordinary, everyday occurrence is highlighted by the presence of individuals who do not take for granted these ways of doing University instruction. In some cases, Native students are not aware of non-Native conventions for conveying attention, the minute behaviors which go together to signal paying attention. In other respects, they may have been drilled by high school teachers in the importance of handing in assignments, for example, so that they may seem compulsive in carrying out some behaviors. The main things that strike ordinary faculty members about Native students are what they term lack of participation or involvement in class. That is, Native students tend not to speak in class and may have different ways of conveying that they are paying attention. Some students, for example, convey deep attention by closing their eyes. Non-Native Americans tend to blink their eyes at intervals determined by the rhythmic patterns of the speaker they are listening to. Lecturers may

unconsciously monitor the audience for signals as minute as eyeblinks and deliver their speech in accordance with expected patterns of feedback.

Patterns of distribution of talk in the classroom also help participants to construct the reality of the classroom. By monitoring the talk, asking questions and legitimating answers, the teacher controls the flow of information. He not only defines the body of knowledge the class comes to agree upon, he tacitly recognizes certain students as gaining control over that body of knowledge.

These face-to-face activities constitute a presentation of self in institutional terms. By means of interaction in real time, participants cooperate in enacting University instruction. They create ensemble around a characteristic underlying tempo. Erickson has shown that speech falling outside of the established institutional tempo is not integrated into the official business of the classroom. College counseling, as shown by Ericson and Shultz, is not as effective when ensemble breaks down between members of different ethnic groups. Similarly, we find that Native students often approach the classroom with a different tempo from non-Native instructors with the result that they display themselves as less willing or competent students than either students or instructors expect.

Difficulties students from rural Alaska face in rhythmically integrating their speaking and listening in the classroom are exacerbated when student and teacher are separated in time and space. The use of instructional telecommunications can not simply extend the University to remote areas.

Audioconferencing eliminates all but audio cues in instruction. Ensemble is broken by satellite delay as well as separation in space. Partcipants together at a site must work at shutting out stimuli from the environment in order to attend to disembodied speech coming from a box. They strive to direct their attention not only in listening but in speaking to participants at distant sites rather than to the ones around them. Speakers tend to focus their eyes on the ceiling, wall, or microphone. Listeners avoid eye contact with others in the same room when concentrating on what comes over the speaker.

Instructors may experience severe disorientation in attempting to lecture as well as conduct discussions. Rather than relying on visual feedback in the form of gaze, eye blinks, head nods and position, an instructor must either request feedback over the audio channel, which is distracting, or do without feedback, which is unsettling. Unlike the face-to-face meeting, there is no unobtrusive way of giving the feedback the lecturer depends on in going on to the next point. Because of the frequency of technical failures, one cannot assume that one is being heard. Even less can one assume one is being understood. It is easy for participants to distance themselves from the ongoing interaction by tuning out or engaging in side

conversations, if they are not at the same site as the instructor. Thus requests for verbal feedback will frequently elicit the confession that distant participants had not been listening.

When discussion is called for, speakers select themselves depending not only on what they have to say or how willing they are to speak but on what access they have to a microphone or hand-set. Rural residents tend to be reticent about talking to people they do not know. They will sometimes select a spokesman to speak on their behalf to a distant instructor, or simply say as little as possible. People who call in to a conference from home tend to take the floor faster and more often than people with microphones. The habitual use of the telephone for dialogue seems to carry over. It is common to ask for comments from sites rather than from individuals. This speeds up the process, since people in each site can look around the room and see whether anyone is about to speak. Informal discussion will often go back and forth between two sites. Some students will ask an instructor for the floor before speaking. This serves as a check on whether the channel is open. Silences tend to be longer than in face-to-face classes, to allow for turn exchange.

At the first audioconference of our course, after a couple of weeks of computer conferencing, students were delighted to hear voices at last. A rural student asked for photographs of the instructors. The human, personal touch is very important, as we had learned in our experience on campus. Because the medium seems to favor informal exchange of ideas, we planned to have most of the discussion by means of computer conference. Our audioconferences have been devoted mostly to procedures of doing the course, with less than a third of the time on presentation of content.

In an audioconference, then, the teacher-student role is constructed primarily by means of voice. The teacher sits together around a table with the students at his site and is prominent only because he monopolizes a microphone while students share microphones and he controls the agenda. Students do their part by expressing interest in certain topics or willingness to go along with the discussion. They may show their presence only by saying their name at the beginning of the conference.

In the asynchronous computer conference, participants are not connected in time or space. Teacher and students construct their social role in relationship to each other separately, at individual terminals. Their interaction is mediated by print, either hard copy on paper or characters on a screen, and by a keyboad. Space, hands, and eyes are used in different ways in this medium. The location of terminals and the ease of access to them are more variable than the positioning of individuals in a classroom. As instructors we exercised a greater degree of control over the medium, had access to a terminal at all hours, and had a greater degree of input than other participants. Most of the students, on the other hand, had never used a computer for

communication. Besides problems of learning, the University computer network was not equipped to handle a conference with 60 participants. The volume of discussion often exceeded the equivalent of 40 double-spaced pages. Thus students experienced many frustrations in dealing with this aspect of the course.

Presentation of self on this medium is restricted to formatting of lines of print. The choices are restricted to use of blank space, upper or lower case, and the use of special characters. Entries are identified only by name. Categories such as undergraduate, graduate student, faculty, and staff are indicated in user I.D.'s, but sex, physical characteristics, voice quality, and other manifestations of face-to-face presence are not transmitted.

Instead of instantaneous, moment-by-moment visual and audio feedback, the instructors had little sense of who was in the class and what sense they were making of it. Because there were no institutional structures to support such a course, registration procedures were cumbersome. As a result, midway through the semester we still did not know who was taking the course for credit. Thus feedback loops were lengthened almost indefinitely. Some students faithfully read everything in the conference but never entered anything. From the students' point of view, comments that would have been acknowledged by the teacher in the classroom were apparently unnoticed. If they were commented on it might be days or weeks later.

Students were confused by what researchers at UCSD have termed "multiple thread discourse." Single messages might combine comments on procedures for class participation, reactions to computer mediated instruction, and comments on various readings and previous comments. Questions and topics for discussion were introduced weekly by the instructors. A handful of students habitually responded to these in the first few days, and people did not usually comment on topics after the next ones were introduced.

Because of the nature of the medium, students expected a great deal of individual instruction on the mechanics of using the electronic mail system. Personal messages also served as a means of humanizing an impersonal medium, but gave the instructors the feeling of constant involvement with the course, which was stimulating but at times wearying. Students were also overwhelmed by the steady stream of comments, but could ignore many comments without feeling guilty about not paying attention as they might in a classroom.

The lack of institutional mechanisms for delivering courses using this medium meant that instructors had to assume responsibility for such functions as registration , instruction in procedures for accessing course files and discussion, maintaining files, and compensating for the lack of personal presence. The number of participants, while presenting problems of management, encouraged a loose structure in which students

were responding to each other and learning from each other much more than is the case in a lecture hall. This is because the computer makes it easy for instructors to monitor what occurs without attempting to control it.

The use of instructional telecommunications thus requires a radical reconstitution of the nature of the teacher-student role. The teacher can not be viewed exclusively as the source of knowledge but rather as a facilitator of the exchange of ideas and information. To the extent that the institution consists of the face-to-face enactment of the teacher-student role, the use of instructional telecommunications constitutes a redefinition of the idea of the university.